

SCRABBLE A LA Russe

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Vladimir Nabokov, like the late James Thurber, is a word-fan's delight; his novels abound with interlingual puns, anagrams, homonyms and other forms of wordplay, so intimately woven into the fabric of his stories that it is difficult to examine them independently. Recently, Albert Wilansky of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania called my attention to a bit of Nabokov logology that forms the subject of an entire chapter in Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (McGraw-Hill, 1969): a Russian Scrabble game in which the heroine scores 383 points on a single move. Although this feat cannot hold a candle to the English-language single-move records reported on in earlier Word Ways, the story is charmingly told and is summarized below.

Since the Scrabble game in the novel was played in July of 1888 by Ada, her younger sister Lucette, and her cousin Van, Nabokov finds it necessary to invent a predecessor to Scrabble called Flavita, a transposal of alfavit, "an old Russian game of chance and skill, based on the scrambling and unscrambling of alphabetic letters". He goes on to describe the board and the rules of play, which, as far as can be ascertained from his oblique prose, is identical to modern-day Scrabble except that 125 lettered blocks (instead of 98 plus two blanks) are supplied. After a digression into Ada's indifferent abilities at chess, Nabokov describes the relative strengths of the three players:

On the Scrabble board, however, this same wild and weak Ada was transformed into a sort of graceful computing machine, endowed, moreover, with phenomenal luck, and would greatly surpass baffled Van in acumen, foresight and exploitation of chance, when shaping appetizing long words from the most unpromising scraps and collops. He found the game rather fatiguing, and toward the end played hurriedly and carelessly, not deigning to check "rare" or "obsolete" but quite acceptable possibilities provided by a loyal dictionary. As to ambitious, incompetent and temperamental Lucette, she had to be, even at twelve, discreetly advised by Van who did so chiefly because it saved time and brought a little closer the blessed moment when she could be bundled off to the nursery, leaving Ada available for the third or fourth little flourish of the sweet summer day. Especially boring were the girls' squabbles over the legitimacy of this or that word: proper names and place names were taboo, but there occurred borderline cases, causing no end of heartbreak ...

After several more digressions, including "the curious affinity

between certain aspects of Scrabble and those of the planchette", Nabokov arrives at the denouement:

"And now," said Ada, "Adochka is going to do something even sillier." And taking advantage of a cheap letter recklessly sown sometime before in the seventh compartment of the uppermost fertile row, Ada, with a deep sigh of pleasure, composed the adjective TORFYaNUYu which went through a brown square at F and through two red squares ($37 \times 9 = 333$ points) and got a bonus of 50 (for placing all seven blocks at one stroke) which made 383 in all, the highest score ever obtained for one word by a Russian scrambler. "There!" she said, "Ouf! Pas facile."

When Lucette protests that Ada has used a place name ("the first little station after Ladore Bridge"), Ada delivers a sisterly put-down:

"That's right, pet," sang out Ada. "Oh, pet, you are so right! Yes, Torfyanana, or as Blanche says, La Tourbiere, is, indeed, the pretty but rather damp village where our cendrillon's family lives. But, mon petit, in our mother's tongue -- que dis-je, in the tongue of a maternal grandmother we all share -- a rich beautiful tongue which my pet should not neglect for the sake of a Canadian brand of French -- this quite ordinary adjective means 'peaty,' feminine gender, accusative case. Yes, that one coup has earned me nearly 400. Too bad -- ne dotyanula (didn't quite make it)."

Alas, it may prove difficult to beat Ada. In addition to the well-known English-language Scrabble, there exist French, German, Spanish and Italian versions of the game. However, a letter to Scrabble-makers Selchow and Righter concerning Russian letter-scores elicited the following cryptic comment from their public relations firm: "Unfortunately the information you requested about scores associated with various letters of the Cyrillic alphabet is not available". Has anyone tried the Moscow GUM lately?